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CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS, INCLUDING THE QUESTIONS OF: FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Written statement* submitted by the Reporters sans frontières international, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[18 January 2002]

*This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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ENG

BELARUS: Brutal repression against the independent press

Government authorities are using every means available to silence the country's independent print media: seizures, closings of printing houses, confiscation of equipment, threats to shut down media outlets, assaults, and intimidation. President Aleksander Lukashenko is one of the thirty-nine predators threatening freedom of the press to have been denounced by Reporters without Borders.

The Belarus presidential election of September 9, 2001 was preceded by eight months of censorship of every independent news source in a country in which freedom of the press is already non-existent, and in which all of the audiovisual media are controlled by the government. The State's printing, distribution, and advertising monopoly poses a constant threat to independent newspapers. The ten leading independent newspapers are systematically harassed, and their journalists threatened. New decrees designed to restrict the right to demonstrate, and foreign aid to non-governmental organizations (NGOs), primarily target opposition media. Any publication of statements or communiqués made by any political parties or human rights' organizations not registered with the Ministry of Justice is prohibited. In December 2000, prior to the start of the electoral year, the country's postal services had raised distribution fees charged to independent periodicals from 400 to 600%, while publications controlled by the State benefited, at that time, from reduced rates.

In June, two former members of the Belarus public prosecutor's office affirmed that they possessed evidence directly implicating the government in the disappearance, in July 2000, of cameraman Dmitri Zavadsky. They accuse the Prosecutor General, Viktor Sheyman, and Deputy Chief of the Presidential Administration, Yuri Sivakov, of having formed a "death squad" in 1996, when they occupied the positions, respectively, of State Secretary of the Security Council and Minister of the Interior. Initially, this group was allegedly directed to murder mafia leaders before being entrusted with more "political" assignments. The two top officials of the public prosecutor's office also asserted that the group's complicity in the disappearance of the journalist, Zavadsky, could be proven by a DNA analysis of a blood stain found in the trunk of a vehicle belonging to one of the alleged members of the group. Cameraman Dmitri Zavadsky disappeared on July 7, 2000, at the Minsk airport, where he was assigned to welcome, after he landed, Pavel Sheremet, Minsk bureau chief for the Russian ORT network. His vehicle was found in the airport's parking lot. In 1996, Dmitri Zavadsky had left the State television organization to work for ORT against the wishes of the Belarus authorities. This journalist, who was the President's former personal cameraman, had been imprisoned along with a colleague from ORT for two months in 1997, following a news report about the deficiencies of Belarus' security measures along the Belarus-Lithuania border.

Journalist incarcerated

On June 12, 2001, Valery Schukin, a freelance journalist working primarily for the *Tovarisch* and *Narodnya Volya* newspapers, was incarcerated in a Minsk prison. On March 15, 2001, he had been sentenced to three months' imprisonment for "vandalism," after having attempted to attend a press conference given by the Minister of the Interior concerning the disappearances of several prominent members of the opposition. Only State-controlled media journalists had been permitted to obtain official accreditation. Despite this restriction, Valery Schukin had come to the press conference, where he was violently assaulted by one of the guards working on behalf of the Minister of the Interior, then transferred to a hospital.

Pressures and Constraints

On January 9, 2001, equipment in a printing house owned by the Magic publishing company—the country's only private publisher, which prints most of the country's independent

newspapers, including *Belarusskaya Delovaya Gazeta*, *Nasha Svaboda* and *Narodnya Volya*—was seized by police acting on the order of the tax administration, for "delinquent taxes." The facility's owner stated that the value of the seized equipment was four times greater than the amount of the debt. The printing concern was left with only one press.

On January 19, the general prosecutor's office brought a suit against the newspaper, *Nasha Svaboda* ("Our Freedom"), for "a libelous attack against the President." On January 12, the newspaper had published an article by psychiatrist Dmitri Schiguelski about President Aleksander Lukashenko's mental health, suggesting that he was suffering from a mental disorder, with paranoid tendencies.

In early February, the editorial staff of the independent newspaper *Brestski Kurier* ("The Brest Courier") received a "warning" from the State Press Committee (three warnings result in the forced closing of a media outlet), for having circulated information about political parties, trade unions, and other unauthorized groups. *Brestski Kurier* is one of the most commercially successful independent regional newspapers.

Also in early February, the independent newspaper *Belarusskaya Delovaya Gazeta* was issued a "warning" by the State Press Committee for having violated the confidentiality of an official inquiry in an article about the investigation led by agents of the special "Almaz" subdivision, who were suspected of having played a part in the disappearance of Russian ORT television network's correspondent Dmitri Zavadsky, in July 2000.

On March 2, customs officers seized 745 copies of the *Belarusskaya Vedamasti* newspaper because it was said that it represents a "danger to the political regime" of Belarus.

On March 2, 11, 15 and 30, some vendors of the independent newspaper, *Nasha Svaboda*, were questioned and harassed by the police.

On March 16, police officers searched the premises of the *Borisovskie Novosti* newspaper, and of the Center for Human Rights, in Borisov.
In March, some equipment was stolen from the *De Facto* independent newspaper's copy room, in Mogilev. The paper was forced to suspend operations.

On March 25, Dmitri Yegorov, a young reporter/photographer working for the independent regional newspaper *Birzha Informacji* was questioned and held for several hours in a police car in the city of Grodno (in the western part of the country), just prior to a demonstration organized by the opposition. The journalist was hit, threatened, and warned that it "would not be in his best interest to write any articles about this questioning." He was then taken to a prison to show him "where journalists can be jailed," after which he was released. The journalist was hospitalized for ten days as a result of his beating.

On July 12, police seized equipment from the independent newspaper *Volny Grad*.

On July 19, police confiscated some equipment from the *Belaruskiy Uschod* newspaper.
On July 25, computer equipment used by the editorial staff of the daily newspaper *Dyen* was put totally out of commission during a burglary. No trace of infraction was found, even though the premises were being guarded by police. A previous burglary of *Dyen* offices on July 17 had prevented the publication of a special issue devoted to the unexplained disappearances of several opposition leaders.

On August 1, the *Dyen* newspaper was banned from printing the paper in the official state Press Center—a State-controlled printing facility. The daily was sanctioned for "incorrectly

interpreting" a decision made by the State Press Committee.

On August 8, the *Pahonya* editorial staff was informed by the secret service (KGB) that their offices might be closed down.

On August 14, equipment belonging to the *Kutseyna* newspaper was confiscated by police.

On August 17, agents of the Minister of the Interior confiscated nearly all copies of the print run produced by the *Nasha Svaboda* daily, whose edition that day included several articles critical of the government, and information about the campaign of the opposition's candidate, Vladimir Goncharik.

On August 22, the Magic printing house's equipment was seized again, and its bank account frozen.

On August 22, ten computers used by the *Narodnya Volya* newspaper's editorial staff were seized by police at the request of tax authorities.

On August 23, one computer used by the editorial staff of the daily newspaper, *Nasha Svaboda*, was confiscated by police for non-compliance with tax laws.

On August 24, the newspaper *Svabodniye Novosti* received a warning from the State Press Committee for "disseminating false information."

On August 28, the Minsk public prosecutor's office ordered that the printing of the *Rabochy* daily edition be halted, and instituted proceedings against it for slurring the President. On that same day, the police seized close to 40,000 copies of the daily, as "exhibits." The authorities sought to prevent circulation of an article entitled: "The Thief Should Be in Jail!" exposing the corruption of senior government officials.

On September 4, President Aleksander Lukashenko declared during an electoral meeting: "Lately, we have been relaxing our control of the media a little, leaving them to their own devices. We must be patient. If we silence them now, they will take full advantage of it. We will settle our accounts with them later (...). There are 250 foreign journalists here for the elections. They have come to harass our country. I just want to get through this period without incident."

On November 13, the Supreme Court ordered the independent weekly *Pahonya* to be shut down for making libelous statements against President Lukashenko, after an article questioned the role the President may have played in the disappearance of some of his opponents. On December 13, Mikola Markevich, *Pahonya*'s editor in chief, was fined for having organized a demonstration, on November 19, to protest the newspaper's closing. He decided not to appeal, because "the Belarus courts serve the interests of one person, not those of society."

On November 19, the public prosecutor's office brought a civil-libel suit against Iosif Syaredzich, editor in chief of the newspaper *Narodnya Volya*, on the grounds that he had published a statement made on September 5 by the opposition's candidate in the presidential elections, Uladzimir Hancharik, accusing the government of tampering with electoral ballots.